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SUBJECT: COURAGEOUS AFGHAN WOMEN LAWYERS, JUDGES, AND
PROFESSORS LEAD BY EXAMPLE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The turnout of approximately 250 female lawyers, judges, and law professors from Kabul and from several northern provinces to a USAID- and INL-funded women's legal leadership workshop in Kabul from December 15-17 overwhelmed organizers. Over the course of the three days, the Afghan women legal professionals participated enthusiastically in small group discussions, role playing exercises, and group presentations all geared toward developing stronger leadership and advocacy skills. Most Kabul participants stated their male peers generally accepted them as colleagues, but provincial participants faced gender discrimination. By the end of the conference, participants departed with renewed commitment to their work and with increased motivation to challenge the obstacles faced by women in Afghanistan's legal field.

Conference: Overwhelming attendance, strengthened motivation

¶2. (SBU) In an important show of support for the event, the Supreme Court, the Ministry of Justice, and the Attorney General's office granted leave to their female employees to attend the conference. Still, organizers were overwhelmed by the number of attendees, especially the strong contingent who traveled from outside of Kabul. Planners expected only 100 women would attend, due to the timing of the event immediately after the Eid holiday and the forecast of severe winter weather. Over 250 turned out and participated through the entire three-day conference.

¶3. (SBU) About a third of the attendees revealed they had studied secretly at home during the Taliban era, with several standing up to emphasize their pride in this accomplishment. Several of the women told poloff they had returned to college as older adults after the Taliban regime ended in order to pursue legal studies.

¶4. (SBU) Women from Kabul reported their male peers generally accepted them as colleagues while women from the provinces described more overt discrimination. One female Kabul judge, however, emphasized even in Kabul women legal professionals still face many barriers including unequal treatment by male colleagues and lack of access to certain academic programs, such as the Sharia law faculty at Kabul University. Several of the women from Samangan province said the rule of law and the judicial system in Afghanistan were developing, but

extremely slowly and unevenly.

¶5. (SBU) It was clear that enthusiasm and a sense of empowerment grew among participants as the conference proceeded. As part of the first conference exercise, leaders encouraged the women to call back to them "waleikum salaam." The women's voices were soft and hesitant, and the leaders teased them, saying "who can hear you." By the end of the conference, the participants yelled responses back to the facilitators. As part of the closing ceremony, event organizers distributed INL-funded briefcases of office supplies and legal texts, a process which caused a good-natured mini-riot as participants scrambled over each other in their excitement to claim their briefcases.

Leading women's rights advocate questions MOWA's advocacy

¶6. (SBU) Minister of Women's Affairs Ghazanfar delivered a disjointed speech at the workshop's closing ceremony. She repeatedly paused and read from the conference's agenda. She urged the attendees to apply the conference's lessons to their family lives as well as their professional lives and expressed her intent to support all Afghan women in pursuing professional careers.

¶7. (SBU) Herat Chief Prosecutor and prominent Afghan civil rights advocate Maria Bashir followed Ghazanfar and passionately reported her group's positive reaction to the conference, characterizing the connections formed between the

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participants and the resulting potential for greatly increased cooperation and coordination as the most important conference take-away. Most interestingly, while standing six inches away from Ghazanfar, Bashir directly criticized the Ministry of Women's Affairs' efforts on behalf of Afghan women. MOWA was not doing enough to support women and needed to improve its effectiveness, specifically by doing more to raise women's awareness of their rights. The audience gave Bashir the largest round of applause by far.

¶8. (SBU) A Kabul judge told poloff she agreed with Bashir's assessment of MOWA and was proud to count such a brave and outspoken advocate for women as Bashir among her colleagues. In a separate conversation with poloff, Bashir also expressed great disappointment with President Karzai's policies toward women, saying Karzai did not keep any of the promises he made to Afghan women or do anything to advance their situation in Afghan society.

Mixed views on the election

¶9. (SBU) Of the 10 conference participants surveyed by poloff, all had registered and all planned to vote in the upcoming election. Several women said they hoped Afghans would elect leaders who would bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, expressing concern about a recent perceived decrease in security. On the other hand, Herat prosecutor Bashir told poloff she did not think the upcoming election would be a meaningful endeavor. Most people did not have enough information about the candidates or issues to make an informed decision for whom to vote.

¶10. (SBU) A different Kabul lawyer predicted overall participation in the election would be significantly lower than during the 2004-2005 elections due to less interest and worse security. She spoke of the election in sharply ethnic terms, saying the "minority Tajiks would support the election and its results, but we doubt we will be fully represented by the winner." She believed Afghans from other groups, including Pashtuns, would vote only for candidates of their own ethnicity. Other attendees, however, expressed more

positive sentiments, characterizing the election as extremely important to Afghanistan's future.

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